

# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

## 2 watchdogs won't oppose sewage waiver

**By: Mike Lee**  
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SAN DIEGO — In a controversial change of direction, two leading pollution-watchdog groups are pledging not to challenge San Diego's bid to finalize its third federal waiver for the region's largest sewage processing facility.

Yesterday, leaders of San Diego Coastkeeper and the local chapter of the Surfrider Foundation said they are forging an agreement with Mayor Jerry Sanders that makes more sense than suing to enforce the Clean Water Act, which the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant violates.

To make up for not spending about \$1.5 billion to upgrade the facility so it treats wastewater more thoroughly, San Diego would pay for a study of how it can use more recycled water and thus minimize wastewater discharge to the Pacific Ocean.

The pact will be discussed publicly today, when state and federal regulators hold a hearing in San Diego to discuss the five-year waiver. Sanders plans to sign the agreement after presenting it to the City Council next week.

“It helps us in terms of forestalling litigation,” Sanders said, and “it gives us an opportunity to look at how we are going to produce a supply of wastewater that's treated for business and other activities.”

For at least seven years, Surfrider and Coastkeeper leaders have criticized pollution controls at the Point Loma plant. They also have threatened litigation to block a third waiver.

In December, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency gave preliminary approval for San Diego's waiver request. That decision renewed environmentalists' efforts to negotiate water-use issues with Sanders instead of going to court.

Eventually, Coastkeeper and Surfrider essentially agreed with one of the mayor's main arguments: Spending more than \$1 billion on relatively minor improvements for the Point Loma facility “may not be the best use of funds,” said Bruce Reznik, executive director of San Diego Coastkeeper.

Reznik would rather see major investments in expanding San Diego's water recycling system, which cleans wastewater for industry and irrigation. Each day, the Point Loma plant discharges about 175 million gallons generated by 2.2 million residents from Del Mar to Chula Vista.

The agreement doesn't require the city to act on ideas that would come from the analysis, which is expected to take about two years to complete and cost the city no more than \$2 million.

“It is definitely a leap of faith,” Reznik said.

The policy shift was a “huge, huge deal” for Coastkeeper and Surfrider, and it has generated criticism from inside the environmental ranks, said Marco Gonzalez, an attorney representing the two groups in talks with San Diego officials.

One critic is Joey Racano of the Ocean Outfall Group, which works statewide to limit water pollution from treatment plants. He plans to oppose the waiver at today's hearing.

“If the environmental groups choose to go along with breaches in the Clean Water Act, then who is left to defend the ocean?” Racano said.

If finalized, the waiver would allow the Point Loma plant to remain as the nation's largest sewage facility without at least a plan to meet the federally mandated “secondary” treatment level for removal of solids and other pollutants.